

# A Cultural Critic Answers His Own

By ALLAN BLOOM

I have gotten a great kick out of becoming the academic equivalent of a rock star. This is partly because the eternal American child in me found it agreeable to experience peculiarly American success from the inside—to find out if I had been missing anything. But mostly it was because I was afforded a closeup look at the closing of the American mind. I have had to learn, however, to be careful to avoid injury as it slams shut on me.

I tried in my book to point to the great sources of those serious ideas that have become dogmas in America today. I urged that we turn to serious study of them in order to purge ourselves of our dogmatism. For this I have been violently attacked as a nostalgic, an ideologue, a doctrinaire, etc., etc. The meaning is really, "Don't touch our belief structure; it hurts."

This dogmatism is neatly expressed in a report recently put out by the American Council of Learned Societies. Modestly entitled "Speaking for the Humanities," it announces a "consensus" at the cutting edge of scholarship that a single method of studying classic texts is true: They are to be studied as the unconscious expressions of the class, race and gender interests or prejudices of their authors. This method will overturn the hegemony of white, Western, male writers and ideas. Scholars who do not accept this way of looking at things are considered not serious.

The report notes that the success of my book is "disturbing" and can be accounted for by American anti-intellectualism. In fact their method is the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, two French writers who passed out of fashion in Paris and whose importation to these shores is like a late arriving miniskirt. All the girls, the report tells us, are wearing it.

Their work is in turn based on the really serious thought of Nietzsche and

Heidegger, whose writings are what really ought to be studied to find out whether their arguments are true. Instead we are invited by this bureaucratic order to adopt their conclusions unreflectively.

We ought to know, on the basis of historical observation, that what epochs consider their greatest virtue is most often really their greatest temptation, vice or danger—Roman manliness, Spanish piety, British class, German authenticity. We have to learn to put the scalpel to our virtues.

Plato suggests that if you're born in a democracy you are likely to be a relativist. Relativism may perhaps be an American virtue, but since we are by birthright inclined to it, we especially better think it over for the sake of our freedom and self-awareness.

I wrote about relativism in "The Closing of the American Mind," speaking of it under its currently reputable name, openness. I have since learned with what moral fervor it is protected and its opposite, ethnocentrism, attacked. This fervor does not propose an investigation but a crusade. The very idea that we ought to look for standards by which to judge ourselves is naughty, and there has been a more or less successful attempt to remove my views from respectable discourse. You simply have to believe in the current understanding of openness if you are to believe in democracy and be a decent person.

If you do not toe this line, you will be called an elitist, a charge meant to make you suspect as an enemy of our democratic nation. This charge of elitism reflects the moral temper of our time, as the charge of impiety would have done in an earlier age. You couldn't get much of a response in a university today saying that Mr. So-and-So is an atheist, but you can get a lot of people worked up by saying that Mr. Bloom is an elitist. And this tells us a lot about where things are at, and explains how

tempting a career is offered to egalitarian Tartufferie.

What we are witnessing in our elite universities is the introduction of a new "non-elitist," "non-exclusionary" system of education in the humanities and parts of the social sciences. This is an extremely radical project that is made to appear mainstream by marching under the colors of all the movements toward a more equal society that almost all Americans endorse. Henry Louis Gates, W.E.B. DuBois professor of literature at Cornell, has described this as his generation's progress from taking over buildings in the '60s to taking over curricula in the '80s—from rifles to canons at Cornell. We face a radicalism that is not recognized for what it is and that can marshal powerful and sometimes angry passions alongside its own fanatic ones.

This movement culminates in a program for the reform of the human understanding. This results in a struggle between two ways of approaching our intellectual heritage. To illustrate these approaches I have selected two quotations. The first is the voice of black educator W.E.B. DuBois at the turn of the century:

"I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I walk arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, they come all graciously with no scorn or condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the veil."

I confess that this view is most congenial to me. DuBois found our common transcultural humanity not in a canon, but in certain works from which he learned about himself and gained strength for his lonely journey, beyond the veil. He found community rather than war. He used books to think about his situation, moving

beyond the corrosive of prejudice to the independent and sublime dignity of the fully developed soul. He recapitulates the ever-renewed experience of books by intelligent poor and oppressed people seeking for a way out.

The second quotation is attributed to a leader of the black student group at Stanford. It dates from a year ago, during the Stanford curriculum debate: "The implicit message of the [Western civilization] curriculum is 'nigger go home.'" DuBois from this perspective was suffering from false-consciousness, a deceptive faith in theoretical liberation offered by the inventors of practical slavery.

The way out offered by the Stanford reforms is a sort of world tour with a relativist compass and without an "ethnocentric" life jacket. The school motto appears to be "Join Stanford and See the World." Students are called upon to open themselves up to new cultures. They are not to judge those cultures using the "Western imperialist" criteria. Indeed, they are not to judge one culture better than any other culture at all.

From this perspective contemporary writers face considerable theoretical embarrassment. When threatened, they run like a herd of buffalo back to the discredited universalistic principle of freedom of speech, no longer mindful of the sacred claims of religions and cultures that they have been preaching to us. To defend that right, though, they would have to read the writers who grounded it, Locke and Milton. But we know, don't we, what the motives of these philosophers are?

Practically, universities are ceding the despised historicized humanities to the political activists and extremists, leaving their non-historicized disciplines, which is where the meat and big bucks are, undisturbed. It is a windfall for the administrators to be able to turn all the affirmative action complaints over to the humanities, which will act as a lightening rod while their ship continues its stately progress over undisturbed waters. Stanford shows its concerned, humane, radical face to its inner community, and its serious technical face to the outside community, particularly to its donors. The humanities radicals will settle for this on the calculation that if they can control the minds of the young, they ultimately will gain political control over the power of science.

If we allow ourselves to be seduced by this radical enterprise, we will turn our backs on the profound sources of our self-awareness. Our loss will be irreparable. This is the view that put me at war with the powers of our day. Anyone who defends what those powers call the West is automatically eligible for admission to the elitist, sexist and racist club.

*Mr. Bloom is professor in the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. This essay was adapted from an address delivered at Harvard.*